

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 1081

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, IT

SUBJECT: PLI NATIONAL COUNCIL CONFIRMS PARTY LEADERSHIP

1. THE JANUARY 18-20 LIBERAL PARTY NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING IN ROME WAS CHARACTERIZED BY A CONCERTED ATTACK ON THE LEADERSHIP OF PARTY SECRETARY BIGNARDI BY THE PARTY LEFT MINORITY FACTIONS (REPRESENTING ABOUT 1/4 OF THE PARTY), JOINED ON THIS OCCASION BY SEVERAL PROMINENT MAJORITY FIGURES (GEROLIMETTO - WHO RESIGNED AS PARTY VICE SECRETARY, BOZZI AND COTTONE). THE MAIN STIMULUS OF THIS CRITICISM INVOLVES THE PARTY'S DECLINING ELECTORAL FORTUNES, EVIDENCED IN THE ISOLATED SAMPLING OF THE NOVEMBER 1973 LOCAL ELECTIONS, AND THE "IMMOBILITY" OF ITS POLICY IN FAILING MORE ACTIVELY TO SEEK WIDER COMMON GROUND WITH THE OTHER DEMOCRATIC LAY PARTIES, ESPECIALLY THE SOCIALISTS.

2. BIGNARDI'S REPLY TO OPPOSITION CALLS FOR A MORE OPEN POLICY TOWARDS THE PSI WAS A STRONG RESTATEMENT OF THE LIBERAL PARTY'S ROLE AS A CENTER PARTY OPPOSED TO THE CENTER-LEFT BECAUSE IT IS "CONDITIONED" BY THE COMMUNISTS. ACCORDING TO BIGNARDI, THE PSI MUST BE JUDGED ON WHETHER IT REMAINS TIED TO THE COMMUNISTS, "AS IT IS TODAY." IN ANY CASE, HE SAID, IT IS NOT THE PLI WHICH REFUSES TO TALK TO THE SOCIALISTS BUT VICE VERSA. BIGNARDI SUCCESSFULLY SPIKED THE OPPOSITION'S ATTEMPT TO CONSIDER THE NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING RESOLUTIONS AS INTERLOCUTORY BY CALLING FOR A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE ON THE MAJORITY MOTION. HE WON THE TEST

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BY A VOTE OF 108 TO 41 WITH EIGHT ABSTENTIONS.

3. DISCONTENT WITH BIGNARDI'S POLICIES AND, BY IMPLICATION, WITH THE LEADERSHIP OF PARTY PRESIDENT MALAGODI, HAS BEEN MORE AND MORE OPEN SINCE THE PLI WAS UNCEREMONIOUSLY DUMPED LAST SUMMER BY ITS DC AND LAY PARTY PARTNERS IN ORDER TO PERMIT A RETURN TO A CENTER-LEFT COALITION WITH THE PSI. THIS DISSATISFACTION WAS REINFORCED BY THE PARTY'S NOVEMBER ELECTORAL LOSSES (A DIP FROM 2.9 PERCENT TO 1.6 PERCENT OF THE VOTE), AFTER WHICH THE PARTY LEFT BEGAN CALLING OPENLY FOR THE RESIGNATION OF BIGNARDI AND HINTING AT GROWING DISAFFECTION WITHIN THE MALAGODI-BIGNARDI MAJORITY. THE ANTI- BIGNARDI OPPOSITION HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL TO THE EXTENT THAT IT FORCED THE RECENT

NATIONAL COUNCIL DECISION TO CONVOKE AN EXTRAORDINARY PARTY CONGRESS (ON A DATE TO BE FIXED BETWEEN APRIL 16-MAY 15) AT WHICH THE MALAGODI-BIGNARDI LEADERSHIP CAN BE PUT ON THE CARPET. IT IS NOT INCONCEIVABLE THAT THE ANTI-BIGNARDI FORCES WILL HAVE GAINED ENOUGH STRENGTH BY THE TIME OF THE CONGRESS TO FORCE OUT THE PARTY SECRETARY. HOWEVER, THE JUST CONCLUDED NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING INDICATES THAT THEY DO NOT YET HAVE THIS STRENGTH AND THAT MALAGODI HIMSELF REMAINS FIRMLY IN THE SADDLE. THE REAL PROBLEM FOR THE LIBERALS IS THAT MANY OF THE PARTY'S YOUNGER MEMBERS FEAR THE PLI PRESIDENT'S MOUNT MAY BE HEADED FOR THE GLUE FACTORY IF THE PARTY DOES NOT MOVE FAST TO CREATE A NEW AND MORE VIGOROUS IMAGE AND A BROADER ELECTORAL APPEAL. VOLPE

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